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THE LOW-INCOME NON-PROFESSIONAL, AN OVERVIEW OF HIS ROLE IN THE PROGRAM.

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THE USE OF LOW INCOME NONPROFESSIONAL WORKERS IN SOCIAL SERVICES WAS FOUND TO BENEFIT BOTH THE WORKER AND THE SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY. FIRST, IT INCREASES THE VOCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE SLUM DWELLER AND PROVIDES HIM WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT OF A SATISFYING JOB. SECOND, THE LOW INCOME NONPROFESSIONAL AS A "SOCIAL CLASS MEDIATOR" FACILITATES EASIER COMMUNICATION AND, CONSEQUENTLY, THE GREATER INVOLVEMENT OF OTHER URBAN SLUM RESIDENTS IN A SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAM. MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH (MFY) IN NEW YORK CITY EMPLOYS NONPROFESSIONALS IN THREE PROGRAMS--THE PARENT EDUCATION AIDE UNIT, THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM, AND THE VISITING HOME MAKER SERVICE. MFY'S CRITERIA IN HIRING NONPROFESSIONALS ARE (1) EXPERTISE IN THE ACTIVITIES OF A PARTICULAR PROGRAM, (2) IDENTIFICATION WITH OTHER LOWER CLASS PEOPLE, AND (3) AN ACTION-ORIENTATION, THAT IS, A BELIEF IN GROUP SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF MINORITY GROUP STATUS AND POVERTY. SHARING MUTUAL INTERESTS WITH THE CLIENTS, AND UNENCUMBERED BY PROFESSIONAL ROLES, THE NONPROFESSIONAL TENDS TO BE MORE DIRECT AND REALISTIC IN DEALING WITH CLIENTS THAN THE PROFESSIONAL. CAREFUL ORGANIZATION CAN MINIMIZE THE COMPETITION BETWEEN THE NONPROFESSIONAL AND HIS HIGHER STATUS COLLEAGUES AND CAN DISCOURAGE THE FORMER FROM BECOMING POOR COPIES OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISORS. ALTHOUGH INSTITUTIONAL RIGIDITIES HAVE SOMETIMES LIMITED THEIR USEFULNESS, NONPROFESSIONALS HAVE CONTRIBUTED SUBSTANTIALLY TO MFY PROGRAMS. (TD)

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MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH, INC.

THE LOW-INCOME NON-PROFESSIONAL !

An Overview of His Role in Program

by George Brager

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THE LOW-INCOME NON-PROFESSIONAL\*  
An Overview of His Role in Program

--George Brager

As a result of chronic staff shortages for social-welfare tasks, increasing attention is being given to the use of non-professional personnel in social work. There is wide agreement that auxiliary personnel ought be used as assistants, to relieve the heavy workload of the harassed social worker. There is also considerable, although less widespread, sentiment for the development of a "Social Work Associate" position, requiring independent functioning.<sup>1</sup> Under the latter scheme, workloads are differentiated: the social worker handles the more "vulnerable" client in circumstances which require a relatively high degree of worker autonomy, and the Associate deals with less "vulnerable" persons in situations which permit greater bureaucratic control.<sup>2</sup> Both "solutions" presuppose well-educated technicians who, although less trained and experienced than the professional, function essentially in his image. By definition, they must be middle class.

The employment of low income persons in social services has certain advantages as well. It serves, of course, to increase vocational opportunities for the undereducated slum dweller. Since automation is eliminating more and more unskilled and semi-skilled positions, there is great need to accelerate the development of service occupations appropriate for untrained persons. Furthermore, as many of us realize helpers often gain more from the helping process than the person who is ostensibly being helped. Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and

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\*I am indebted to Gertrude Goldberg for her assistance in the preparation of this paper.

Synanon may be viewed in part as substituting for the addiction to alcohol and narcotics the addiction to helping. Engaging in a helping occupation enhances the self-image of low-income persons; it provides them with psychological support, and they themselves report considerable satisfaction in the job.<sup>3</sup> Thus, from a broad social perspective, providing new roles for low-income persons is a highly salutary objective.

Other objectives in using non-professionals have barely been considered and there is virtually total silence on the possibility that low-income persons might perform program tasks.<sup>4</sup>

This paper explores the use of the low-income non-professional to achieve these more programmatic goals. These goals must be closely specified, for they determine the characteristics of the non-professional who is employed, the tasks to which he is assigned, his means of performing those tasks, and the organizational arrangements which guide his work.

One important programmatic goal in hiring non-professionals is to increase the meaningful participation of other urban-slum residents in social-welfare and community programs. Our belief that the employment of non-professionals can contribute to this end stems from a number of assumptions and takes into account social-class variables often neglected in social-welfare considerations. One assumption is that low-income persons can establish contact with other slum residents more easily and maintain communication with them more effectively than professionals can. The "likeness" of the low-income non-professional may facilitate rapport with clients and encourage them to use the agency's program, whether it provides individual services or community action. The

social climate of the service may be significantly affected by <sup>persons</sup> drawing/ from and of the community, "representative" of the style, values, needs, and wants of the community's low-income residents. The low-income non-professional may also serve as a "bridge," interpreting the residents to the agency and its personnel, and vice versa.

This social-class-mediating function is one of the major objectives in the employment of low-income persons in the three programs from which this paper draws. These programs, all part of Mobilization for Youth,<sup>5</sup> are a Visiting Homemaker Service, a Parent Education Aide unit, and a Community Development program. Approximately forty low-income inner-city residents are employed in these three activities.

The Visiting Homemaker Service works with individuals and families to increase their competence in home management. In addition, homemakers teach the use of community resources (e.g., they help clients to establish eligibility for public assistance and public housing), offer companionship and psychological support, and provide escort and mother's-helper services. Group teaching and community activity are minor components of the service.

At the other end of the service spectrum is the Community Development program, whose goal is to encourage community residents to engage in autonomous and collective protest designed to improve social conditions. Services to individuals and groups, such as finding jobs, filing housing complaints, and organizing social events, are a necessary but peripheral feature of the community-organization program.

The Parent Education Aide unit has engaged in individual problem solving, group teaching, and community action, as the situation required. Parent aides try to help residents make home conditions such



as to facilitate school achievement. They also try to increase the responsiveness of school personnel to the low-income family. "Generalists," they welcome in-migrants, facilitate parent-teacher interaction, suggest appropriate referrals, organize informal discussion groups and building committees, and assist in mass efforts to protest school conditions.

In addition to attracting low-income residents to these programs, and making their participation meaningful, the indigenous non-professional serves as an effective role model for other residents. Such a worker has a particular expertise in coping with the life problems of the inner city. Persons who themselves have negotiated slum conditions and welfare resources can be of great assistance to others. Homemakers, for example, know how to stretch leftovers, use surplus foods, recognize bargains, plan children's schedules, as well as how to deal with merchants and even with public and private agencies. Their abilities and attainments, while considerable, may yet be within the grasp of other, more impoverished, residents.

Characteristics Sought in the Low-Income Non-Professional -- In employing low-income non-professionals to broadly affect social climate, it is neither possible nor desirable to draw a "representative" sample of workers from the low-income community. The specific goals of the program will be a major determinant of the characteristics sought. If, for example, an important objective of the service is to enable working-class persons to strive for and reach middle-class status, it might be desirable to employ low-income people who are oriented to middle-class life. One consequence of such a decision, of course, is that, if other factors are equal, less striving persons will then be likely

to avoid participation. To cite another example: if the agency's intention in hiring non-professionals is to give the appearance of minority-group or low-income representativeness without impinging upon the middle-class value base or organizational prerequisites of the agency, it will choose low-income persons who are willing to accommodate to these requirements.

These are, of course, gross characteristics, and cannot at this stage of our knowledge be further refined. In the three Mobilization programs we have mentioned, however, the following rough criteria provided the framework for recruitment decisions. Persons with some expertise in the program's area were sought. That is, reasonably good home managers, though not compulsive cleaners, were hired as Homemakers; Parent Aides were required to have had children in school; and Community Development workers were expected to have some experience in leading formal or informal groups. Persons who seemed to be identified with other working-and lower-class people and particularly with their own culture group, but who did not reject their less striving neighbors, were preferred. Particularly within the Community Development program, and to a lesser extent in the others, action-oriented residents were sought, those who believed in group solutions to the problems of impoverishment and minority status and who were militantly oriented to changing social conditions. Beyond these criteria, the intent was to recruit a cross section of the stable working-class community as regards such demographic characteristics as ethnicity, and to select those with some personal experience in dealing with social problems. Many workers were, in fact, drawn from the Department of Welfare rolls. Others had close relatives who exhibited some

significant social problem, such as school maladjustment, delinquency, or addiction. The group reflected the minority-group composition of the low-income community. Subsequent review indicated that the parents of the non-professionals employed by Mobilization were educationally equivalent to current community residents, so that educationally at least, the non-professionals were one generational rung up the ladder.

A random survey of the attitudes and perceptions of community residents was conducted prior to the action phase of the Mobilization for Youth project.<sup>6</sup> Similar questions were subsequently asked of the agency's professional and low-income non-professional staff. Although these responses have yet to be fully analyzed, preliminary review indicates that the attitudes and perceptions of the low-income non-professional, as expected, more closely conform to those of the community than do the professional's. Asked to rate the Lower East Side as an excellent, good, average, poor, or very poor place to live, 70.5 percent of the professionals answered poor or very poor. Only 37.5 percent of the indigenous staff agreed with this designation, while the community response was a close 34.4 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The "Style" of the Low-Income Non-Professional -- The following report by an observer of a tenants' meeting led by a Community Development worker ("Lila") illustrates some differences between the ways in which non-professionals typically approach their task and the more traditional methods of the social worker.

Two persons whose building had been cleaned as a result of Lila's efforts came to the meeting to enlist the aid of the group in alleviating other building violations. One of them explained that he couldn't convince his neighbors to take part. Lila detailed the necessity



of their signing a building complaint, and kept saying that if people don't want to help themselves, she couldn't do anything for them. However, as she said this, she let them know what the results could be if they were to unite. At her suggestion, the meeting adjourned, and all the members went down the street to the building to convince the tenants of the need to sign the complaint form. It was an extremely impressive and moving scene in which old women and children and other adults were strung along the dark stairways of the apartment building while Lila knocked on the doors to urge tenants to sign.

The action of the community worker was immediately responsive to the needs of the two tenants. It was spontaneous and partisan. The worker was in the center of activity, exhorting her "clients," training by demonstration, and providing direction. Another illustration of the central role of the non-professional is furnished by a Parent Aide's record which notes that "a chairman and secretary were elected to assist me in planning for the group." cursory analysis of their

records further supports the conclusion that the non-professionals tend to provide active direction, for the reports reveal that they "decided," "announced," and "insisted." This differs sharply from professional recording, in which workers are more likely to "suggest" and "enable."

The non-professionals are considerably less formal. They will hug clients, accept--and repay--their hospitality, and share first-name designations. The tenants' association meeting described above was attended by children with balloons and bubble gum, as well as by old women, middle-aged and young adults. Although they were wrestling with problems resulting from serious housing violations, there was laughter and gaiety; although much was business conducted, there was no formal meeting. An amusing instance on the low-income non-professionals' informality occurred at an agency staff party attended by the

Homemakers. "The agency psychiatrist, who danced with one of them, asked her if he was doing all right. Undaunted by his dark vest and dangling watch chain, she said, 'Just fine, baby, but twist a little harder.'"<sup>8</sup>

Mutuality of interest between the non-professional and the program participant and shared group loyalties are sharply evident. Thus record material refers to "we Puerto Ricans," "us Negroes." There is considerable reciprocity and sharing of favors. A group of residents will picket a building because of discrimination by a landlord against a Parent Aide. A client will give surplus foods to a Homemaker.

Professionals in all three programs report that much information is shared with the non-professional which the professionals, working with the same client, receive much later, or not at all. Enhanced communication is undoubtedly a consequence of the mutuality of interest of non-professional and community resident. The non-professional has no need to validate his presence in the community, which gives him a considerable advantage over the professional from the outset. Communication can be short-cut and friction eliminated because much is taken for granted as a result of the common background. The non-professional has a sense of life's meaning to the client out of their shared experience. The peer status of the non-professional and community resident further maximizes communication.<sup>9</sup>

Non-professionals are unencumbered by "professional role," a concept which low-income clients rarely understand. Although these clients tend to define impersonality in the professional as unfriendliness, a supervisor of the Homemakers notes that the hostility and seeming prejudice which some of them displayed apparently did not impair their

relationship with clients. "The Homemaker may show favoritism to one child over another, bawl out a client who's already been beaten down, do for instead of with, 'over-identify,' scorn, even curse."<sup>10</sup> She is, however, unlikely to be resisted. This situation may be due, in part, to the reality in the relationship, to the fact that it reflects a more usual interaction of persons than is prescribed in a professional relationship. In addition, the subtle intimidation of the middle-class professional's authority is eliminated as a factor. Clients do, nevertheless, view the non-professional as a representative of the organization, and in spite of initial congeniality, testing does occur.

The non-professional tends to give stronger weight to external life circumstances than to internal factors. In instances where case-workers have defined clients as "neglectful," non-professional staff have been more likely to see the behavior as a response to depressed conditions. A Homemaker touchingly ascribes the impulsive credit buying of a woman to the fact that "Being young, she wants everything in life." When the same young woman reports a conversation with her dead husband, the Homemaker acknowledges the woman's mental illness and recommends referral to a mental-hygiene clinic, although her further comment suggests that such diagnosis and referral may be the result of supervisory influence: "My honest [sic] opinion is that she needs to remarry."

The non-professional accepts information at face value and acts directly upon it. A woman with low self-esteem is invited by a Parent Aide to her house for dinner, told she is worth something, and urged to go out and buy something for herself. A surface definition is, of course, of limited value, since it may lead to an obvious, but erroneous,

action. It can serve as a corrective to an over-reliance upon intrapsychic interpretation, however. The low-income non-professional's diagnosis also provides an important clue to the low-income client's perception of the problem.

Since they themselves have had extensive dealings with public services, low-income non-professionals tend to look askance at bureaucratic authority. In their service function as well, they quickly see the barriers to the resolution of individual and community-wide problems stemming from organizational rigidity or disinterest. They are, furthermore, less interested in or sensitive to the maintenance requirements of the agency which employs them. There is suspicion, not wholly founded, that agency policy reflects the views of conventional and powerful interests rather than of their people. Since their predilection is to respond immediately and directly, they are led to confrontation with other agency systems.

Some Structural Considerations -- It is, of course, essentially inaccurate to ascribe the method of practice of the non-professional group wholly to the characteristics of certain types of low-income persons. One must also take into account the immediate environment which conditions their functioning: in this case, the social agency. Who trains the non-professional, for what purpose, and, most importantly, how that relationship is structured, are crucial factors in a review of his performance. Non-professionals are quite likely to convey the wishes of their employers, subtly but effectively. It has been asserted, for example, that some parents are hired by schools to aid the system in deflecting parental criticism. Community militancy may be reduced by hiring local leaders to "cool out" others.



Low-income non-professionals were employed in the programs described in this paper in order to attract other impoverished persons who ordinarily avoid social services, to encourage the development of services meaningful to these persons, and to bring about their active involvement in individual and collective community problem-solving.

In short, the milieu of the program was intended to reflect low-income style and method. The characteristics of the workers sought and their performance on the job stem from these purposes. Structural considerations are a farther aspect of this formulation.

Low-income non-professionals were assigned a wide range of tasks, and great freedom in carrying them out. They gave advice, processed complaints, made referrals, offered support, and guided the development of community-action strategies, in addition to performing other more concrete and specific functions. Because of this wholistic, non-segmented role, much of their activity had to take place outside the purview of professional observation. Since written material is not a viable supervisory tool with undereducated workers, professional control was inevitably limited.

Logically, tasks requiring discretion are allocated within organizations in accordance with staff training and experience. Inexperienced and undereducated persons usually perform functions which do not require or permit significant decision-making. The Chicago Area Project, long an advocate of the use of indigenous workers, notes that "one of the most distinctive features of project procedure was the employment of local residents, in appropriate categories and under the tutelage of staff sociologists."<sup>11</sup> While Visiting Homemakers, Parent Aides, and Community Development Workers were supervised by professionals, they



had vast discretionary powers. If their functions had been delimited, however, or their tasks too closely defined, the differences in style which we have noted between the non-professional and the professional would not have emerged so clearly. Dilution of the non-professional's impact upon program climate might be the consequence.

The non-professional will make frequent practice mistakes. These are ordinarily neither serious or irreparable; nor do they resemble in effect the condescension, indifference, misunderstanding, and even cruelty which impoverished persons encounter all too often in dealing with conventional institutions. The wholistic role of non-professionals poses other problems. Their assignment to some traditional social-work tasks implicitly derogates the enabling role of the professional. When, in addition, high value is placed on the low income worker's difference from the professional's, there is the further implication that non-professionals can do what professionals cannot. On the other hand, the non-professional is encouraged to vie with his trained and higher-status colleague when functions are shared. Status anxiety and hostility between the two groups are the consequence.

Strains can be minimized or exaggerated by structural arrangements. The Visiting Homemakers both provide auxiliary service to clients of agency caseworkers and offer assistance independently; the Parent Education Aides are part of a separate program with its own clientele. Not unexpectedly, tensions are greater in the former program. If the 15 Homemakers were dispersed throughout the project, supervised by individual caseworkers rather than by the two unit supervisors to whom they are currently responsible, strain would be reduced and greater integration of individual services would be achieved. Once again,

however, an attenuation of the distinctive "flavor" of the indigenous staff might be the result. The choice of structural arrangement will depend upon the clarity with which an agency views the interrelationship of structure and goal, as well as its choice among the conflicting values which underlie different objectives. In the present example, a milieu congenial to lower-class persons was favored over tension reduction and more effective integration. Our penchant for administrative neatness is exceedingly difficult to resist, however!

Low-income non-professionals are all too easy to "professionalize." As a supervisor of Homemakers has noted, "Because they could easily be induced to act as middle-class persons, we had to encourage them to be themselves, or, as it were, to remain as sweet as they aren't."<sup>12</sup> In the early stages of the Community Development program, it was recognized that the assignment of non-professionals to individual community organizers in varying sub-units of that program encouraged them to imitate their supervisors. In becoming less skilled professionals, they were undermining a basic purpose of their employment. This problem can best be met by providing the non-professional with the safety of numbers. Their tendency to withhold information and opinion in one-to-one contacts with middle-class professionals is significantly less evident in group session. Within the alien confines of a social agency, they need the support of one another. When they are together, on the other hand, it is the supervisor who may need help! If it is not possible, for programmatic reasons, to assign the non-professionals as a collectivity, one solution might be a group training program.<sup>13</sup>

An Assessment -- An assessment of the effectiveness of using low-

income non-professionals in the three programs is implicit in many of the preceding comments. It is a documented fact that the programs serve vast numbers of low-income persons heretofore unreached by private-agency services.<sup>14</sup> Although this probably has more to do with the nature of the service than with the use of non-professionals, it is safe to assume that they are a contributory element. A vivid example of their ability to engage participation is provided by the project's voter-registration drive. Both professionals and non-professionals did extensive door-to-door canvassing, with dramatic differences in achievement: the extensive success of the non-professionals was matched by the extensive failure of the professionals.

For good and ill, the non-professionals have placed their stamp upon agency program. They have been a source of pressure upon the agency to move in an activist direction. The lack of felt social distance between non-professional and client has facilitated rapport and enhanced communication.

Whether the non-professional has contributed to the particularistic objectives of the specific programs is impossible to determine. Home-maker supervisors indicate a considerable upgrading of home-management skills, with other benefits as well. Reports on the other programs are similarly positive. Like most social-work evaluation, however, they reflect the educated but essentially subjective judgments of interested professionals and therefore have limitation as evidence.

One major failure has been the inability of the non-professional to facilitate communication between the low-income resident and conventional persons and institutions. Within the agency, non-professional staff tend to be unheeded, except their own particular programs.

Their efforts with outside institutions have been even more disappointing. As persons of minority-group status, without material or educational attainment, they are frequently dismissed by the personnel of the large service systems, barely accorded legitimacy in their official contacts with them. Language difficulty, lack of "polish," and working-class status create a gulf. Their advocacy of their people and their cause widen it.

The use of indigenous persons in program roles tends to be challenged by responsible persons and institutions. Internal and external pressures are brought to bear to dilute their impact. Resistance to these pressures may well result, however, in an organization more accountable to and "in tune" with the lower-income population of the community it serves.

May, 1964

## NOTES

1. Bertram M. Beck, "Wanted Now: Social Work Associates," remarks delivered at the National Conference of Social Workers, 1963, (mimeographed).
2. Willard C. Richan has developed this formulation. See "Utilization of Personnel in Social Work: Those with Full Professional Education and Those Without," final report of the Subcommittee on Utilization of Personnel, National Association of Social Work, 1962.
3. Gertrude Goldberg reports the enthusiastic and dedicated approach of non-professionals in an unpublished paper, "Untrained Neighborhood Workers in a Social Work Program," mimeographed, 1964.
4. Settlements and social agencies have in practice used low-income persons extensively as group leaders, gangworkers, etc. Reports of their experience have not found their way into the literature, however, except for the reports of the Chicago Area Project and two recent articles by Gertrude Goldberg and Frank Reissman, detailing the experience of Mobilization for Youth. Peripheral comments on this subject have been made by sociologists. See, for example, Herbert Gans, "The Urban Villagers."
5. Mobilization for Youth is a large-scale demonstration project in delinquency reduction, supported largely by government funds. With a major emphasis upon educational and youth-employment programs, it also provides community-organization activities, services to individuals and families, and group services. The community-organization effort focuses upon "organizing the unaffiliated"--i.e., lower-income persons and groups heretofore uninvolved in community issues.



6. A proposal for the Prevention and Control of Delinquency by Expanding Opportunities, Mobilization for Youth, 1961.
7. Charles F. Grosser, "Middle Class Professionals...Lower Class Clients," Unpublished D.S.W. Dissertation Proposal, 1963.
8. Goldberg, op cit.
9. Organization theory has amply demonstrated that interaction between equals is greater than between persons with status differential. See Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, "Formal Organizations," Chandler Publishing Co., San Francisco, 1962, for one source of this position.
10. Gertrude Goldberg, "Report on Visiting Homemakers," Mobilization for Youth, July 1963, mimeographed, p. 70.
11. Solomin Kobrin, "The Chicago Area Project--A 25-Year Assessment," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 322 (March 1959), p. 24. Emphasis added.
12. Gertrude Goldberg, "Untrained Neighborhood Workers in a Social Work Program," mimeographed, 1964, p. 24.
13. This solution is being considered in the Community Development program. The proposed content of the training program may be of some parenthetic interest. The goals of the Community Development program, the social values of the agency, substantive information regarding community problems, and some notions about power were to be emphasized. The how of organizing were to be largely left to the Community Development worker.
14. The Records Development Unit of the Mobilization for Youth Research Department has reported to this effect.

relationship between regular attendance and school achievement.

In conclusion: Mobilization For Youth is operating on the hope that alternatives for improving education in slum areas can yet be demonstrated. It is groping for answers to long standing, unsolved problems by emphasizing innovation and research wherever possible. What has started out as educated guesswork may turn out to be exercises in futility in some Mobilization programs and demonstrated success in others. There has been so much failure in slum schools that it is unrealistic to expect appreciable improvement by providing more of the same services currently available in these schools. There does not seem to be much more value in mining the same educational lode. New explorations are needed desperately, or else schools will have to admit ineptitude for the present and promise nothing better for the future. So much is at stake in the education of children in depressed areas that any salutary outcomes of the Mobilization experiment will be well worth its public support.